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# Evaluation of the USDA Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations

## Volume I, Evaluation Findings

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### Abstract

Reducing the burden of applying for food stamps or enhancing benefits appears to increase participation of the elderly in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Historically, low-income seniors ages 60 and older who qualify for FSP benefits participate at low rates because they feel it is not worth the effort to apply. To identify effective strategies for raising participation among this population, USDA designed three models, each using different techniques to reduce the barriers that seniors face in FSP participation. The techniques involve reducing the time and effort of applying for benefits, aiding seniors in navigating the application process, and giving seniors the option of receiving commodity packages instead of getting benefits through electronic benefits transfer cards. The models were tested as county demonstrations in six States between 2002 and 2004. This report presents the findings from an evaluation of the demonstrations. Successful demonstrations increased the number of participating seniors by 20-35 percent after 21 months of operation.



Food Assistance  
and Nutrition  
Research Program

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## ACRONYMS

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AAA	Area Agency on Aging
ACCSA	The Alamance County Community Service Agency
CAB	Commodity Alternative Benefit
CRT	Community Renewal Team, Inc.
CSFP	Commodity Supplemental Food Program
DCF	Department of Children and Family Services
DES	Department of Economic Security
DSS	The Department of Social Services
EBT	Electronic Benefits Transfer Card
FACES	Food Assistance Connecting Eligible Seniors
FANS	Food Assistance and Nutrition for Seniors
FDA	U.S. Food and Drug Administration
FSP	Food Stamp Program
GAO	Government Accountability Office
MiCAFE	Michigan's Coordinated Access to Food for the Elderly
MOW	Meals on Wheels

MPR	Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
SCSEP	Senior Community Service Employment Program
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
TFC	The Food Connection
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
VTa	Vocational Trades of Alamance

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Overview:** Historically, low-income seniors age 60 and older who qualify for benefits in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) participate at extremely low rates. To identify effective strategies for increasing participation among this population, the U.S. Department of Agriculture designed three model program changes, with each model employing different techniques for reducing the barriers to FSP participation that seniors face. The three models were tested as county demonstration programs in six states between 2002 and 2004. This report presents the findings from an evaluation of these demonstrations. Some demonstrations resulted in relatively large increases in elderly FSP participation while other demonstrations resulted in little or no impact. Relatively large impacts were observed from demonstrations employing each of the three demonstration models. Successful demonstrations increased the number of participating seniors by between 20 and 35 percent after 21 months of operation. These demonstrations are effective because they make participation in the program worth the burden of applying for benefits, either through reducing those burdens or by enhancing the benefit to the client.

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Policymakers have long been concerned that low-income elderly individuals who are eligible for food stamp benefits tend not to participate in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Historically, only about one out of every three eligible elderly individuals participates in the program, and these rates have fallen in recent years. In fiscal year 2002, only 27.7 percent of those households with elderly that were eligible to receive food stamps participated in the program (Cunyngham 2004).

Low participation rates for the elderly are especially troublesome because these individuals have unique nutritional needs. Many elderly persons suffer from medical conditions that require special diets. Moreover, low-income elderly individuals with health conditions often face the choice of spending resources on food or on medication, a choice that can harm their health whatever the decision. Without adequate food assistance, the nutritional needs of the low-income elderly may go unmet.

In response to these concerns, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded the Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations—six projects aimed at testing ways to increase FSP participation among eligible elderly individuals. The demonstrations were designed to reduce the barriers to FSP participation that the elderly face by simplifying the application process, increasing eligible elderly individuals’ understanding of the program, assisting elderly individuals with the application process, and providing food stamp benefits as commodities rather than as traditional program benefits.

USDA also funded an evaluation to assess each demonstration’s ability to increase participation among eligible elderly individuals. Additionally, the evaluation examined which types of seniors were attracted to the FSP under the demonstrations, what seniors liked and disliked about the demonstrations, and which demonstrations were most cost-effective.

This report presents the findings of that evaluation. The results suggest that a variety of approaches can be effective in increasing program participation among the elderly. Many seniors appeared not to participate in the FSP because the burden of applying for food stamps outweighed the typically small program benefits. When the application burden was reduced even by a small amount, a significant number of seniors entered the FSP. In particular, seniors eligible for low levels of benefits, as well as older seniors—two groups for whom small levels of burden can pose large barriers in relation to program benefits—were particularly likely to participate under the demonstrations.

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### What Are the Three Models for Increasing Elderly FSP Participation?

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To test alternative strategies for increasing FSP participation among the elderly, USDA designed three demonstration models: (1) the simplified eligibility model, (2) the application assistance model, and (3) the commodity alternative benefit model. These models take different approaches to reducing the costs of applying for food stamps, increasing knowledge of program availability and benefits, and reducing stigma. In 2002, a total of six states implemented one of the Elderly Nutrition demonstration models in one or two counties (see Table 1).

The **simplified eligibility model** is designed to reduce the time and effort it takes for seniors to apply for food stamps. Under this demonstration, applicants did not have to submit documentation of income and expenses (although proof of citizenship was still required). Additionally, the eligibility interview required of all FSP applicants was waived for elderly clients at the demonstration sites. Florida, the only state to adopt the simplified eligibility demonstration, implemented the demonstration in two counties.

The **application assistance model** seeks to reduce the burden of applying for food stamps by giving seniors one-on-one aid in navigating the application process. Under this demonstration, eligibility rules remained unchanged, but elderly applicants were paired with

**Table 1: Six Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations**

Demonstration Sites	Start Date	End Date
<b>Simplified Eligibility Model</b>		
Florida: Leon and Gadsden Counties	February 2002	December 2003
<b>Application Assistance Model</b>		
Arizona: Pinal and Yavapai Counties	September 2002	April 2005
Maine: Waldo County	February 2002	February 2004
Michigan: Genesee County	November 2002	January 2005
<b>Commodity Alternative Benefit Model</b>		
Connecticut: Hartford region	November 2002	October 2004
North Carolina: Alamance County	November 2002	September 2005

application assistance workers who helped them assemble documents needed to apply for food stamps, explained the application, and often completed the forms on their behalf. Additionally, the eligibility interview required of all FSP applicants was waived for clients served by application assistants. Three states adopted application assistance demonstrations: Arizona, Maine, and Michigan.

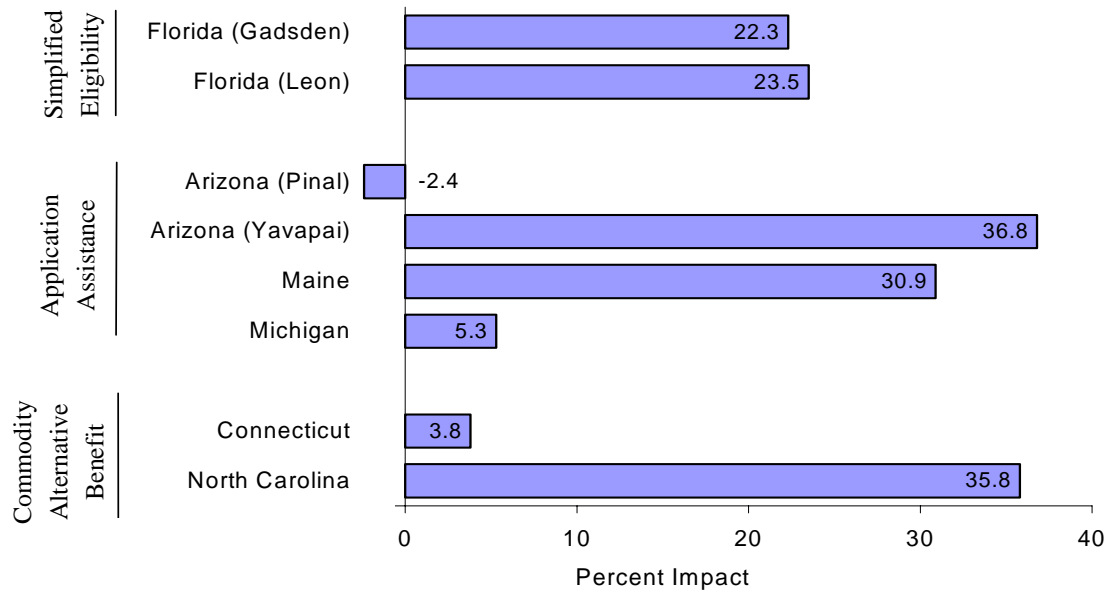
The **commodity alternative benefit model** gives FSP households with elderly the option of receiving packages of commodities each month, instead of getting benefits through an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card. The packages were intended in large part to reduce the stigma associated with receiving traditional FSP benefits. Because benefits were not used publicly in stores, and because packages were received only once or twice a month, elderly participants were less likely to be viewed as “receiving welfare.”

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### **Did the Models Increase Elderly Participation?**

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Most of the elderly nutrition demonstrations appear to have created relatively large increases in elderly FSP participation after just 21 months (Figure 1). Successful impacts were observed in demonstrations that adopted each of the three demonstration models. For the simplified eligibility model, the demonstration in Florida increased participation among the elderly by more than 20 percent in two separate demonstration counties. For the application assistance model, the demonstration in one of the two Arizona counties increased participation by almost 37 percent and the demonstration in Maine increased

**Figure 1: Percent Impact on FSP Participation by the Elderly After 21 Months**

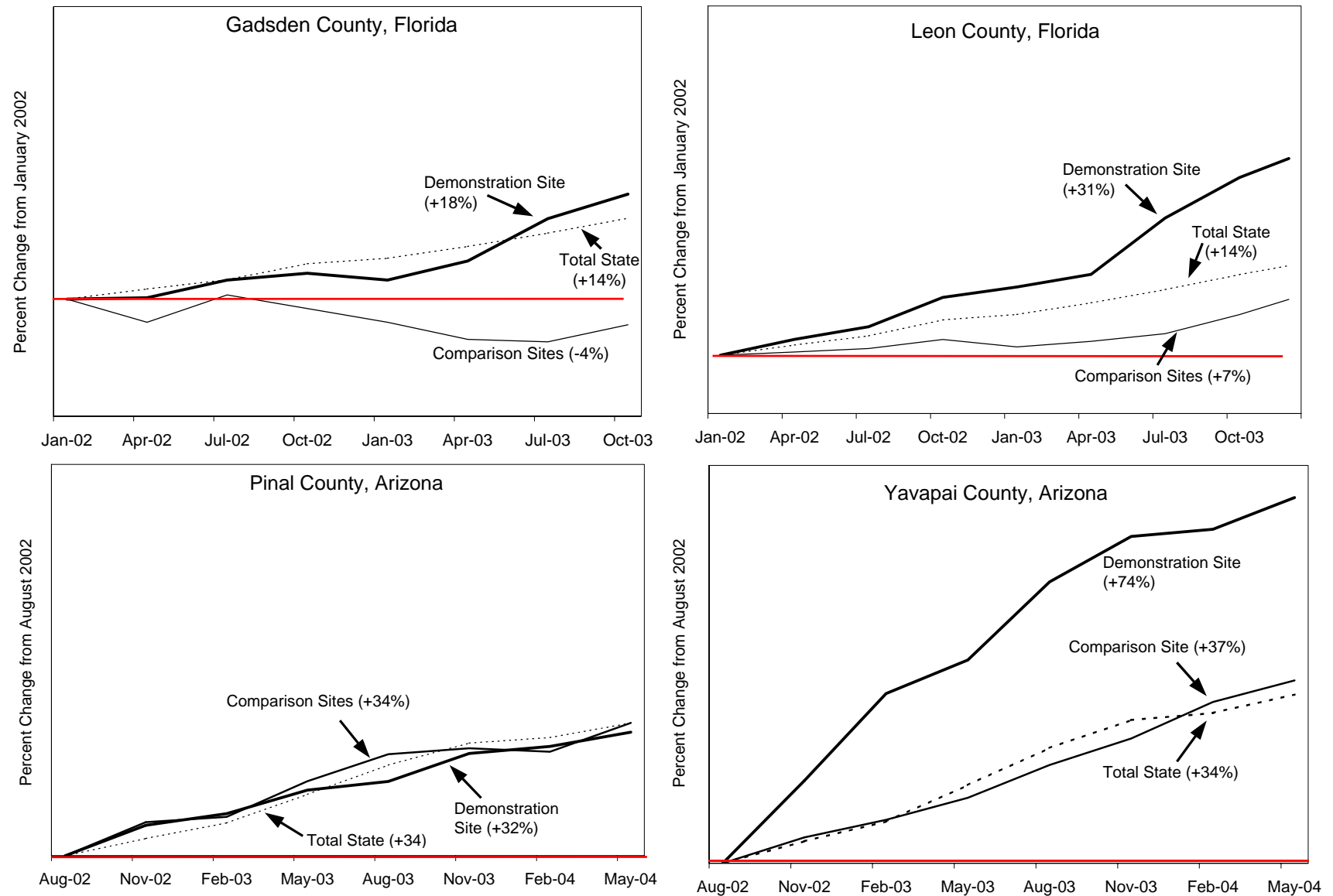
participation by almost 31 percent. For the commodity alternative benefit model, the demonstration in North Carolina increased participation by almost 36 percent.

These impacts suggest that the historically low FSP participation rates among the eligible elderly population can be increased. A 20 percent increase in the number of FSP participants nationwide would raise the national FSP participation rate for the elderly from 28 percent to 33 percent. A 35 percent increase in participation would raise the rate to 37 percent.

For each demonstration, the impact estimates in Figure 1 were derived by comparing participation changes observed in the demonstration sites with participation patterns observed in similar comparison sites that were in the same state but did not have the demonstration. The comparison sites were selected because, prior to the demonstration, they had elderly FSP participation patterns that were similar to those of the demonstration county. As a result, they approximate how elderly participation would have changed in the demonstration sites during the 21-month analysis period if the demonstrations had not been in place. Thus, the difference between the demonstration and comparison site changes (see Figure 2) reflect the impact of the demonstration.

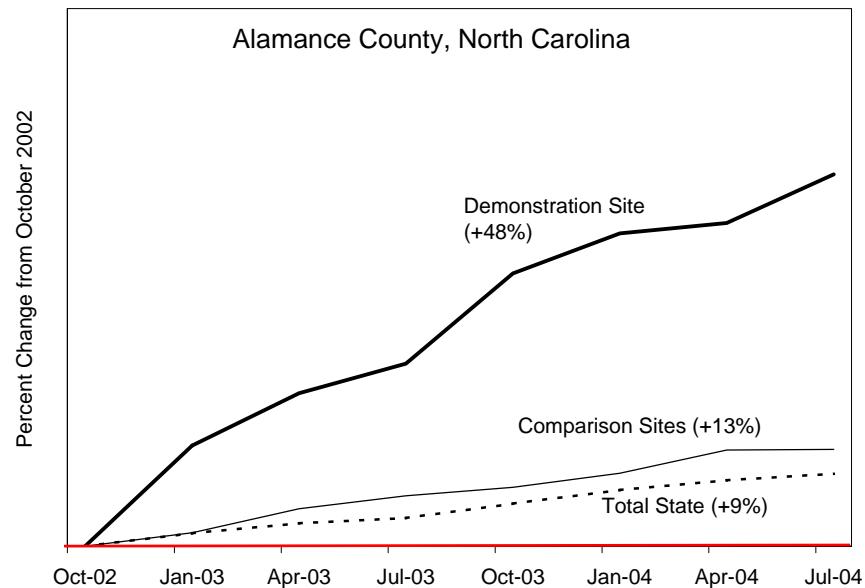
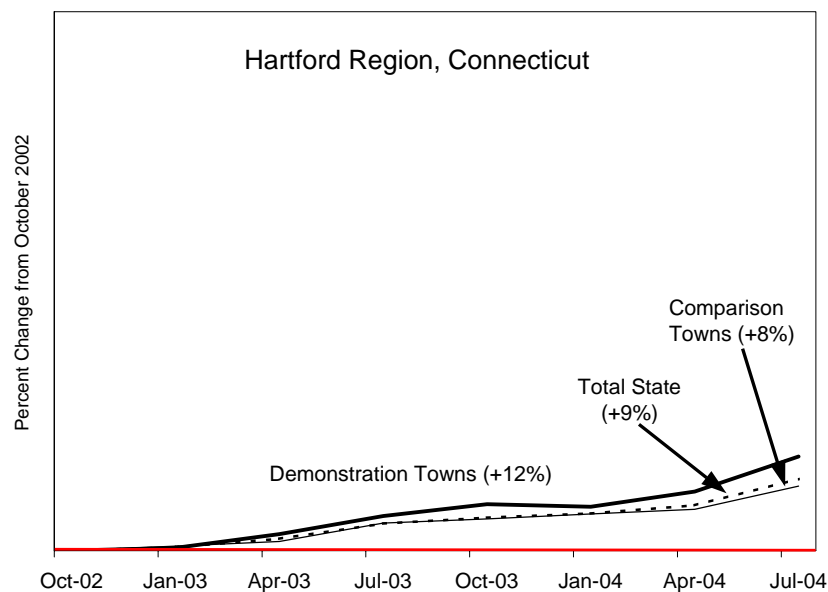
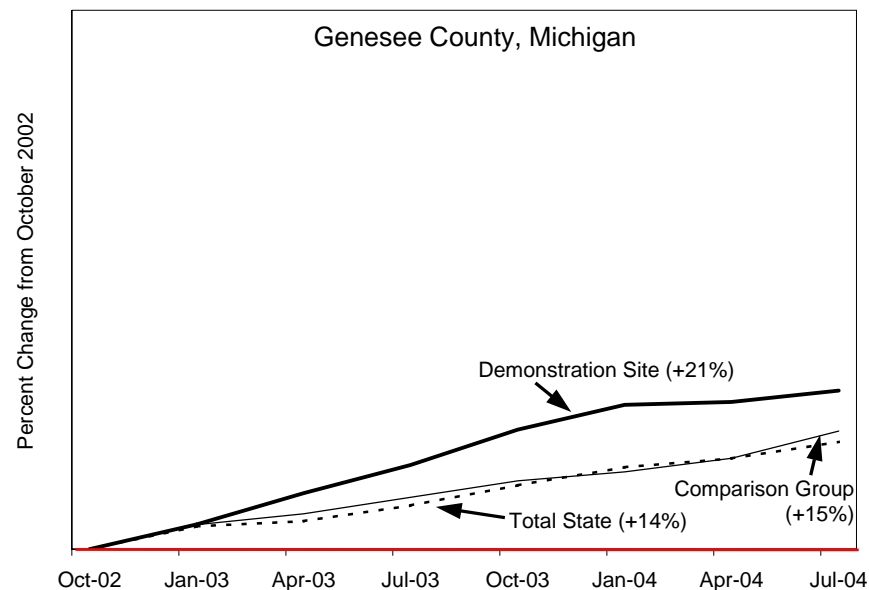
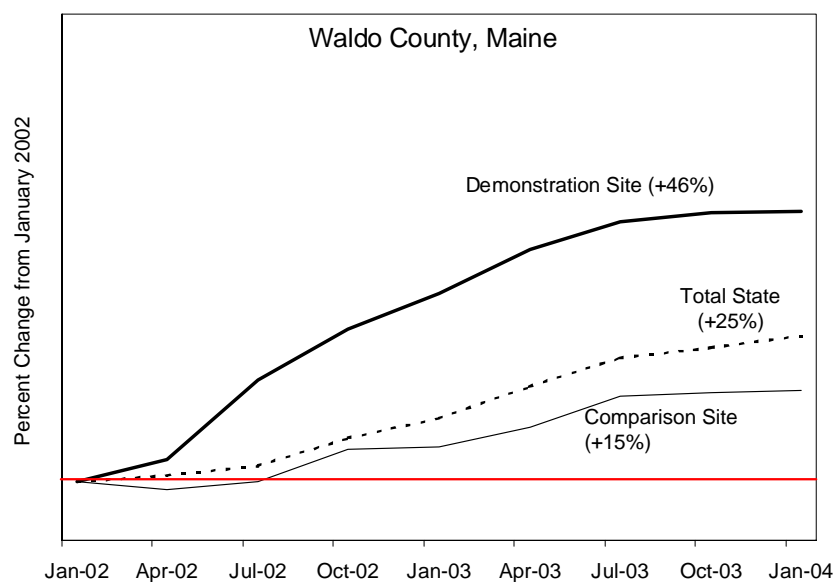
To explore the validity of the impact estimates, other, regression-based estimation methods were employed. While these methods yielded impact estimates that differed somewhat in magnitude, the overall findings were consistent. In particular, the demonstrations in Yavapai County (Arizona), Alamance County (North Carolina), and Waldo County (Maine) had the largest impacts, while the demonstrations in both Florida counties had somewhat smaller but still sizable impacts.

**Figure 2: FSP Participation Patterns By Elderly in Demonstration and Comparison Sites**



Note: for each demonstration, percent change is computed relative to the month immediately prior to the start of the demonstration.

**Figure 2 : FSP Participation Patterns By Elderly in Demonstration and Comparison Sites** *(continued)*



Note: for each demonstration, percent change is computed relative to the month immediately prior to the start of the demonstration.



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## What Made the Successful Demonstrations Effective?

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In deciding whether to apply for food stamps, seniors appear to have weighed the costs of applying against the benefits received by the program. The most effective Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations were those that could either lower the costs of applying or increase the benefits of participating.

*“[If I had to go to the Food Stamp Office,] I would have never, never have applied for those food stamps. Never.” – An elderly FSP client in Florida*

Seniors who were interviewed and participated in focus groups as part of the evaluation provided substantial evidence that, without the demonstrations, their costs of applying outweighed the program benefits. The costs most important to seniors were the nonfinancial factors, such as the burden of the application process and the stigma of receiving public assistance.

Seniors described many types of application burden. They indicated that, without the demonstrations, the entire application process was confusing. To them, the paperwork requirements were daunting, especially because they perceived much of the paperwork to be unnecessary. Seniors were also particularly vexed by the personal interactions at FSP offices. They indicated that eligibility workers at local offices sometimes did not treat them with respect or dignity. As one client in Arizona explained, *“I’ve had a lot of seniors tell me they won’t sign up because it wasn’t worth the problems.”*

Stigma was another cost associated with participating in the FSP. While it is unclear the extent to which stigma alone would prevent an elderly individual from participating in the FSP, stigma was a persistent concern among clients. In particular, seniors were concerned about the way that other shoppers and grocery store staff perceived people using food stamps. Many also said they would be embarrassed if friends and family knew they were receiving benefits. Seniors felt particularly sensitive to stigma because of an elevated sense of pride. As one client said: *“When you’ve had a good life and you’ve worked hard all your life and then all of a sudden, boom, you don’t have nothing. And it’s embarrassing to have to admit.”*

Not only do seniors face costs in applying for food stamps, but also the benefits of participating are often low. Because seniors often receive fixed monthly income from Social Security and sometimes from the Supplemental Security Income program, they tend to qualify for low levels of FSP benefits. Indeed, in 2000, 44 percent of seniors eligible for food stamps qualify for the minimum food stamp benefit of \$10 a month (FNS 2002). As a result, the costs associated with application burden and stigma do not need to be very high to outweigh the expected low program benefits.

***“I will say...they are very, very helpful.... They went overboard.” – An elderly FSP client talking about the demonstration in Arizona***

The demonstrations were effective in part because they either lowered the costs of participating or increased the benefits. The simplified eligibility and application assistance demonstration models worked primarily through reducing the application burden. In Florida, where the simplified eligibility model was used, seniors could apply without having to assemble documentation on income and expenses. They did not have to travel to the local FSP office, or even participate in an

eligibility interview over the phone. In Arizona and Maine, clients received personal, one-on-one assistance in completing the application. Demonstration staff helped them to identify which documents were needed and to fill out the application forms. As in Florida, applicants did not need to travel to the local FSP office or participate in an eligibility interview with FSP staff.

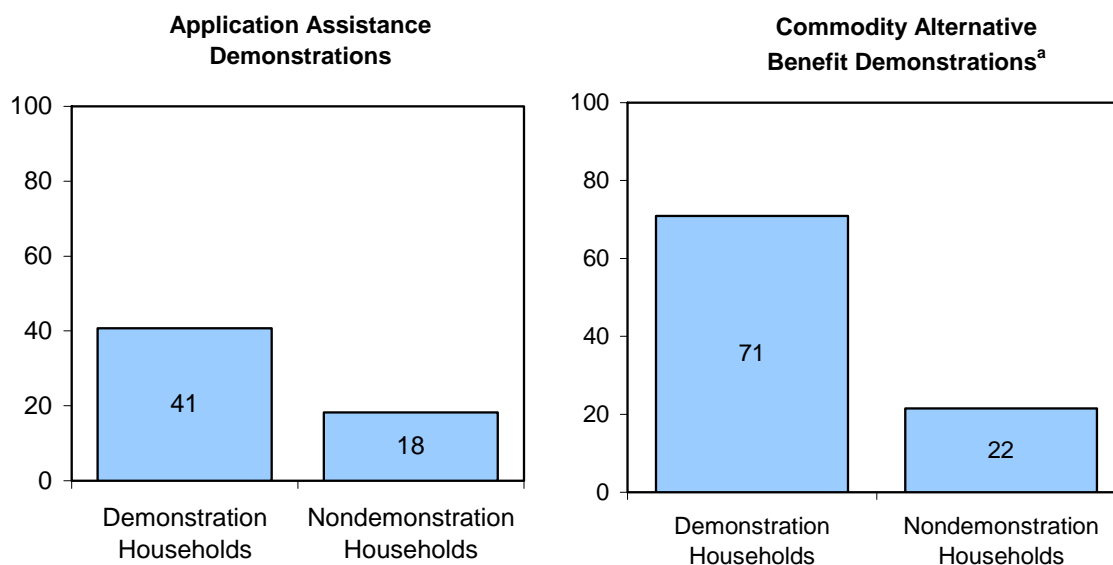
Seniors receiving food stamps in the simplified eligibility and application assistance demonstrations also appreciated the fact that benefits were provided via electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards. Because these cards can be used in local stores like debit cards, other shoppers were less aware that the senior was purchasing food with food stamps. This reduced the stigma of receiving food stamps. EBT cards were not a part of the demonstration, but since they were relatively new to the FSP in these sites, many seniors who applied for benefits through the demonstration first became aware of EBT cards when they were enrolled in the program.

Demonstrations using the commodity alternative benefit model raised the value of food stamp benefits for many clients. The contents of the package did not vary by the amount of regular FSP benefits for which households qualified. Thus, in North Carolina, clients who might otherwise have received \$10 in food stamps were able to opt for a commodity package with a retail price of between \$60 and \$70.<sup>1</sup>

The role of the demonstrations in reducing costs and increasing benefits can be illustrated by which types of seniors participated in the demonstrations. Households with elderly that were enrolled through the application assistance demonstrations were twice as likely as other households with elderly in the same county to be eligible for a \$10 benefit (Figure 3). This suggests that the application assistance demonstrations reduced the costs of applying enough to attract more households eligible for the minimum benefit. At the commodity alternative benefit sites, those enrolled in the commodity program were more than three times as likely to be eligible for a \$10 benefit as those receiving traditional FSP

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<sup>1</sup> The cost to the government of the commodity packages was less than the retail price. For each commodity package, the demonstrations could spend up to the average benefit paid to elderly individuals in their demonstration site. In the second year of the demonstration, this was \$46 in Connecticut and \$39 in North Carolina. These costs to the government included the costs of the commodities as well as the costs of shipping and storage.

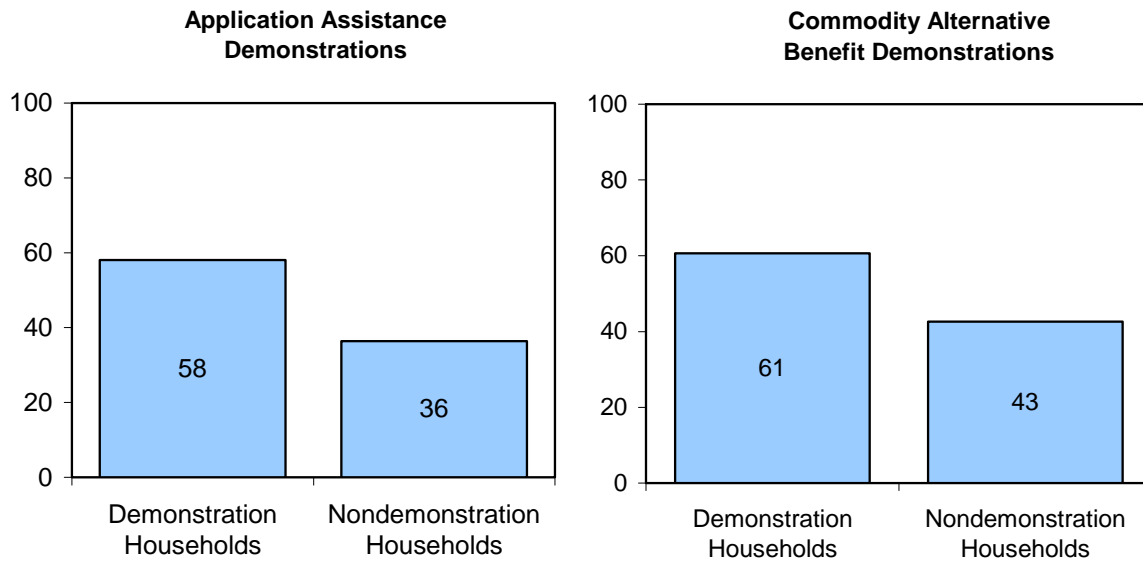
**Figure 3: Percent of Households Eligible For \$10 FSP Benefits: Demonstration Sites Only**

<sup>a</sup>Reflects the level of benefits households would receive if they participated in regular FSP.

benefits.<sup>2</sup> As with the application assistance demonstrations, this suggests that the higher benefits (and potentially the reduced stigma) of the demonstration attracted households eligible for \$10 in food stamps. The tendency to attract households eligible for a \$10 benefit was not apparent in the simplified eligibility demonstration in Florida.

The demonstrations also attracted disproportionate shares of seniors at the older end of the age distribution. Older seniors are more likely to have cognitive or physical limitations that make the burden of applying for benefits more significant. In the application assistance demonstration sites, demonstration households were more likely to have a household member over age 70 (Figure 4). This suggests that the assistance provided in these demonstration sites was enough to reduce the application barriers for older individuals. Similar patterns were observed in the commodity demonstration sites, where those receiving commodity packages were more likely to have a household member over age 70. While the application process for demonstration and nondemonstration households was the same in these commodity sites, older individuals may have preferred the commodity demonstrations

<sup>2</sup> While many of the households participating in the commodity demonstration were new to the FSP, some were ongoing food stamp clients who converted to the demonstration. The estimates in Figure 3 reflect the proportion of all demonstration enrollees, including those that had previously been receiving food stamps.

**Figure 4: Percent of Households with an Individual Over Age 70**

Note: Distribution in application assistance sites computed over all households with elderly; distribution in commodity alternative benefit sites computed over pure elderly households.

because they reduced the burden of shopping. There also was some evidence in the simplified eligibility demonstrations that those households attracted by the demonstrations were more likely to contain individuals over age 70 (not shown).

In addition to changing the costs and benefits of participating, the demonstrations helped increase FSP participation through promotion of the FSP. Many seniors indicated that they did not know they qualified for food stamp benefits and others indicated they did not know the program was available. Each of the demonstrations that had relatively large impacts also had effective strategies to inform clients about the availability of FSP benefits. In Florida, a televised advertisement was used in the demonstration counties to promote the FSP to seniors, and a call center was established where seniors could be “prescreened” for eligibility and told the amount of benefit they likely would receive. In Arizona, application assistants also used prescreening to promote the program to seniors. The demonstrations in Maine and North Carolina often used personal contact with seniors to promote the program.

Seniors interviewed or participating in focus groups as part of the evaluation had extremely positive assessments of the demonstrations. In simplified eligibility and application assistance demonstrations, seniors appreciated having minimal interaction with local FSP offices. Seniors in the application assistance demonstrations also reacted positively to the personal assistance and to the “respect” that they received from the application assistants. In the commodity

demonstrations, seniors were pleased with the amount of food they received, especially those who were eligible for only \$10 in food stamp benefits under the traditional program.

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### **Why Were Some Demonstrations Less Effective?**

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While most of the demonstrations showed signs of success, three demonstrations appeared to have limited impacts. In two of these demonstrations—the application assistance demonstration in Pinal County, Arizona, and the commodity alternative benefit demonstration in the Hartford region in Connecticut—the impact estimates are close to zero. This is consistent with other information about the demonstrations, and there is little reason to believe that the demonstrations had much of an impact on elderly FSP participation. In the third demonstration—the application assistance demonstration in Genesee County, Michigan—alternative estimation techniques yielded impact estimates of between 5 and 10 percent (still considerably smaller than the estimates for other demonstrations). This, combined with other information about the Michigan demonstration, leads to the conclusion that the Michigan demonstration did have some impact on elderly participation, but it was still less effective than most of the other demonstrations.

For the demonstrations in Pinal County and the Hartford region, the limited effectiveness appears to have been caused by site-specific problems rather than by more fundamental issues with the demonstration model. Both demonstrations struggled with an inability to communicate the availability of the demonstration to potential clients. Staff whose responsibility it was to inform low-income seniors about the demonstration services and benefits were unable to spread the word effectively. Moreover, in the Hartford region, the process for distributing commodities was both complicated and inconvenient, leading some clients to become frustrated with the process of picking up their commodity packages.

The experience in Michigan may reflect a variety of factors. The Michigan demonstration provided application assistance at senior centers and other facilities serving the elderly. Due to the closing of key senior centers in the city of Flint, the demonstration was unable to establish a meaningful presence in the largest community in the demonstration site during the initial months of the demonstration. However, this does not appear to be the only explanation for the relatively small impact since participation growth rates among the elderly did not increase once new centers were brought into the demonstration. The limited impact could suggest that the senior center-based approach is not a good way to reach the eligible elderly. While outreach was conducted to encourage seniors to visit these centers to apply, it is likely that the principal source of clients was the seniors already using these services. Additionally, the experience in Michigan may reflect inherent difficulties associated with providing application assistance in an urban environment.

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### **What Are the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Three Models?**

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One way of assessing the relative strength of each demonstration is by measuring cost-effectiveness. Each of the demonstrations served a relatively large number of elderly clients. However, many were providing services to clients that probably would have participated in the FSP even in the absence of the demonstration. Since the primary objective of these demonstrations was to bring more seniors into the program, it makes sense to examine the dollar cost of success. To determine the cost-effectiveness of the demonstrations in light of the central objective, we divided the total costs of operating each demonstration by its net impact on participation to compute the cost per net new FSP household.<sup>3</sup>

Given that the simplified eligibility demonstrations had limited monthly labor costs but still generated a sizeable impact, this model appears to be the most cost-effective. The monthly demonstration costs in Florida amounted to \$402 per net new household attracted to the program (Figure 5). Most of the costs in the Florida demonstration were the ongoing costs associated with outreach and other efforts to promote the demonstration.

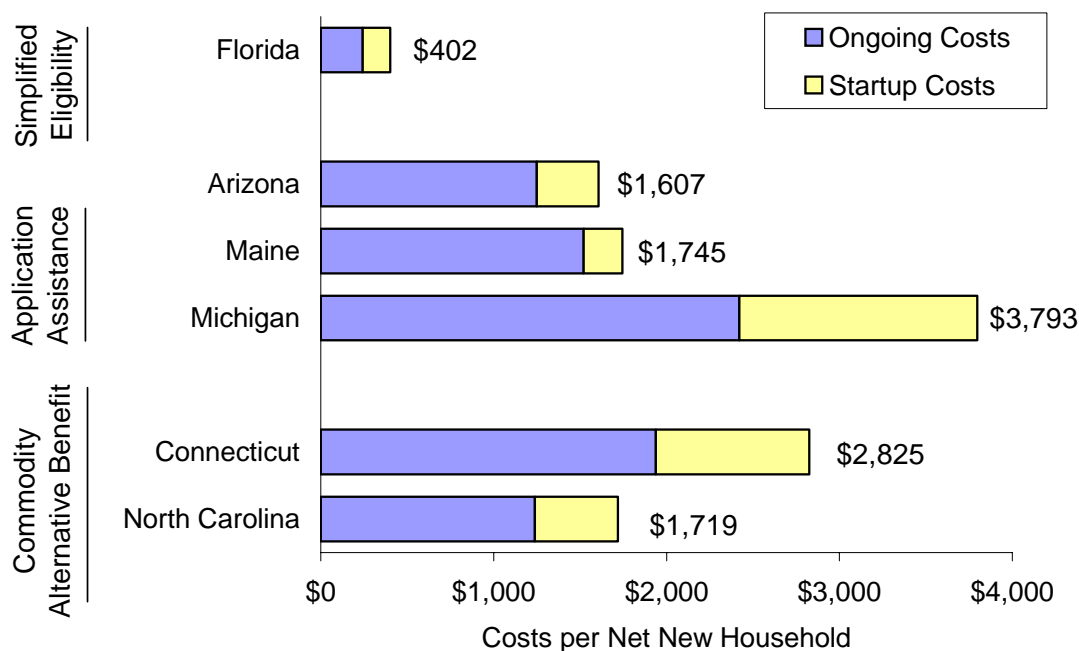
The other demonstrations were more labor-intensive than the Florida demonstration, and as a result, the costs per net new household were higher. The demonstrations in Arizona, Maine and North Carolina, all of which generated relatively large increases in elderly FSP participation, cost between \$1,600 and \$1,750 per net new household. The remaining demonstrations in Michigan and Connecticut, which generated limited impacts on elderly FSP participation, had the highest costs per net new household (\$3,800 in Michigan and \$2,800 in Connecticut).

Key demonstration components led some sites to have higher start up costs than other sites. In Arizona and Michigan, a heavy reliance on technology required significant investments at the start of the demonstration. In Connecticut and North Carolina, the costs of equipment for commodity distribution and storage constituted significant start up costs.

Each demonstration model is associated with economies of scale that would likely reduce these per-impact costs were the demonstrations expanded. Whether the demonstration costs are ultimately high enough to argue against replication depends on how policymakers value both the increase in elderly participation and the other benefits of the demonstrations. While the costs per net new household may be high, the benefit of increased elderly participation combined with the benefit of services provided to the elderly caseload in general may justify those costs.

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<sup>3</sup> The number of net new households participating as a result of the demonstration was derived from the impact estimates presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 5: Total Demonstration Costs Per Net New FSP Household With Elderly<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>Total costs do not include costs of food stamp benefits or commodity benefits provided to demonstration participants.

The strengths and weaknesses of the demonstrations were not judged solely by their cost-effectiveness. The demonstrations also varied in terms of their abilities to serve key types of clients and the ease with which they could be implemented (Table 2). The strengths and weaknesses of each model are summarized below.

### **Simplified Eligibility Model**

The simplified eligibility model was not only the least costly demonstration, it also was the easiest to implement. The start-up costs of the demonstration were low, and once the rule changes were put in place, the only substantial ongoing activities consisted of promoting the FSP to seniors. Another strength of the model was that it helped reduce the workloads of FSP caseworkers, since the eligibility interviews were waived and less work was needed to verify income and expense information.

There are potential weaknesses with this demonstration model. First, while there was little evidence in Florida that clients misused simplified rules, the limited verification creates the potential that applicants may misreport income, assets, and expenses to attain eligibility or increase their benefits. Such actions would lead to higher program costs.

**Table 2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Elderly Nutrition Demonstration Models**

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Simplified Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Least costly</li> <li>• Easiest model to implement</li> <li>• Reduces clients' application burdens</li> <li>• Simplifies workload for caseworkers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential errors in benefit determination</li> <li>• May not reach clients with substantial cognitive or physical limitations</li> </ul>
Application Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces clients' application burdens</li> <li>• Can reach clients with substantial cognitive or physical limitations</li> <li>• Simplifies workload for caseworkers</li> <li>• Can provide access to multiple assistance programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labor-intensive</li> <li>• More costly than Simplified Eligibility</li> <li>• Effectiveness is highly sensitive to the abilities of application assistants</li> <li>• May provide services to clients that do not need them</li> </ul>
Commodity Alternative Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces stigma of in-store use of FSP benefits</li> <li>• May be less burdensome than grocery shopping for some seniors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most costly demonstration</li> <li>• Commodity distribution process is complicated and can be inconvenient to clients</li> <li>• Reduces clients' flexibility with respect to food choices</li> </ul>

Moreover, while the demonstration reduced the application burden for many seniors, it may not have reached those clients who needed the most assistance with the application process. Clients with substantial cognitive or physical limitations may still require some form of assistance in completing the application process, even under the simplified rules.

### **Application Assistance Model**

The application assistance demonstrations reduced clients' burden of applying and helped increase their knowledge of the eligibility process. In some cases, particularly when assistance was provided in the home, the demonstration was able to better serve clients with mobility limitations. Moreover, as with the simplified eligibility demonstration, the waived eligibility interview and reduced paperwork eased the workloads of FSP caseworkers.



However, the application assistance model was significantly more labor-intensive than the simplified eligibility model. As a result, it was also more costly. Additionally, the demonstrations provided services to as many clients as possible, including clients that would have applied for benefits anyway, and may not have needed assistance. Another weakness of the demonstration model is that its effectiveness is contingent on the ability of the demonstration staff to communicate well with seniors and, to some degree, their ability to be persuasive. As a result, successful replication of these demonstrations is not guaranteed.

### **Commodity Alternative Benefit Model**

The commodity alternative benefit model was developed to test whether commodity packages would prove more attractive to seniors than traditional FSP benefits. The results show that the packages do appeal to some seniors. Seniors appear to be attracted to the commodity programs because they received more food than they would have with traditional FSP benefits. In addition, receiving food through the commodity alternative benefit demonstration may be less burdensome for seniors than is grocery shopping. While the demonstration may also reduce the stigma associated with using FSP benefits in stores, this did not appear a major factor in seniors' participation decisions.

The weaknesses of the commodity alternative benefit model stem from its costs and complexity. Commodity distribution is an expensive process that involves substantial labor costs as well as the costs of equipment for storing and distributing commodities. Moreover, unlike the other demonstration models, which are structured to serve clients at the time of application, the commodity alternative benefit model provides services to clients each month that they are enrolled, and this increases costs. The process of distributing commodities can become extremely complicated and difficult to coordinate, and this, in turn, can affect the level of service given to clients. Finally, while commodity benefits may appeal to some seniors, others would prefer to receive traditional FSP benefits, which allow them to purchase the types and brands of foods they like most.

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## **What Are the Implications for Future FSP Policy?**

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The success of the three demonstration models leaves policymakers with decisions about how best to address low elderly participation rates in the future. The different demonstration models increased participation in different ways, each with its own set of costs and obstacles to successful replication. There may be interest in expanding some of these demonstration models in the future—or even the combination of certain aspects of the models. Moreover, state FSP agencies and local organizations may seek to replicate some components of the demonstrations, such as providing some form of application assistance, or reducing the need for in-person eligibility interviews among seniors.

The results of this evaluation suggest several key policy implications should be considered in developing future efforts to increase FSP participation among the elderly.

## **FSP Participation Can Be Increased Among the Elderly**

The first implication is that elderly FSP participation *can* be increased. Previous research had identified several barriers to participation for the elderly, and it appears that efforts to reduce those barriers yield more elderly participants. As a result, the historically low participation rates for the elderly can be increased through a variety of effective options. The impacts of the demonstrations suggest that reducing these barriers can potentially attract more seniors who are eligible for low benefits, as well as more seniors who are older and potentially face mobility and cognitive limitations.

## **The Dollar Cost of Success Can Be Significant**

Since the primary objective of these demonstrations was to bring more seniors into the program, it makes sense to examine the dollar cost of success, and, as we discovered, this cost can be significant. For each net new elderly household (that is, households that would not have participated in the absence of the demonstration), the demonstration costs ran from \$400 to \$4,000. Each demonstration model is associated with economies of scale that would likely reduce these per-impact costs were the demonstrations expanded (although the degree to which they are reduced depends on the demonstration's variable costs such as labor and food distribution equipment). Whether the demonstration costs are ultimately high enough to argue against replication depends on how policymakers value both the increase in elderly participation and the other benefits of the demonstrations. While the costs per net new household may be high, the benefit of increased elderly participation combined with the benefit of services provided to the elderly caseload in general may justify those costs.

## **Conditions for Effective Replication**

The lessons learned from the experiences of the individual Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations suggest that several conditions must be in place for replications of these demonstrations to be successful. As noted above, the basic condition is that the efforts must make the costs of applying less than the benefits of participating. Other conditions for success also exist, however.

First, the results of the various demonstrations underscore the importance of publicity. It is unrealistic to expect any of these demonstration models to have much of an impact on rates of participation unless seniors are made aware of the demonstration services and program benefits. Each of the successful demonstrations included expanded efforts to inform seniors about the availability of food assistance benefits. In several cases efforts to market the program without using the term “food stamps” appeared successful (such as the public service announcement used in Florida, or the multi-program approach used in Maine). Any future initiatives aimed at increasing elderly FSP participation must involve effective approaches for informing seniors about the availability of program benefits and about changes made in the program to better accommodate seniors.

A second factor necessary for successful replication is effective staff. This is most important for efforts that involve direct contact with seniors, but also relates to other activities, such as the development of effective outreach and ongoing commodity distribution. The

disparate outcomes of the two demonstration counties in Arizona show how different staff implementing the same procedures can have very different results. In designing future efforts, consideration should be given to whether the types of staff needed to make the effort effective are available.

For commodity alternative benefit demonstrations, an efficient and user-friendly distribution process also is needed for successful replication. If the process is not user-friendly, clients easily can become frustrated, and the costs of participating may again outweigh the benefits. With respect to replication, there likely is not a one-size-fits-all approach to the efficient distribution of commodities. The process employed in the North Carolina demonstration, which was centralized and well-liked by clients, would probably not have worked well in a large urban area like Hartford, because the number of clients served could potentially overwhelm the simple distribution process. However, the experience in the Connecticut demonstration showed that increasing the complexity of the distribution process can create other problems that frustrate clients. In short, the distribution process must be tailored to the circumstances of the community served.

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### **What Questions Remain?**

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The results of this evaluation raise additional research questions about effective approaches to increasing elderly participation. These questions could not be answered, given the limited number of demonstrations that were examined. Nevertheless, policymakers should give consideration to these issues in designing efforts to increase elderly participation in the future.

### **Which seniors were not reached by these demonstrations?**

Even the largest impact estimates suggested by the evaluation results—increasing participation by about 35 percent in 21 months—would not bring elderly FSP participation rates in line with those of other FSP-eligible groups. A 35 percent increase in participation would raise the overall participation rate from the current level of 28 percent to about 37 percent, meaning that 63 percent of seniors still were not participating. Thus, there still may be some types of seniors not effectively reachable through simplified eligibility, application assistance, and/or commodity benefits programs. Knowing the characteristics of these nonparticipants could help to develop even more effective efforts in the future. In this evaluation, we were able to examine only the characteristics of those reached by the demonstration, leaving uncertainty about the characteristics of those not reached.

**Did differences between urban and rural environments play a significant role in the effectiveness of the demonstrations?**

Among all the demonstration sites, only Leon County, Florida, the Hartford region in Connecticut, and Genesee County, Michigan contained relatively large urban areas. Of these sites, the Connecticut demonstration had little or no impact on elderly participation, and the Michigan demonstration had an impact much smaller than those of the successful demonstrations. It is possible that the complications associated with providing services to a large, densely populated area limited the effectiveness of these demonstrations. In Leon County, where large impacts were observed, such complicating factors were minimal, since in-person services were not provided. Moreover, demonstration impacts observed in rural areas might have been partially attributable to what is sometimes perceived as a more friendly culture in rural areas. Unfortunately, without more demonstrations, it is difficult to tell whether these policies are less effective in urban areas, all else being equal.

**How much of the impacts can be explained solely by outreach?**

Interviews with seniors confirmed previous research findings that many seniors did not know about the FSP program or, more commonly, were unaware that they are eligible for benefits. In some cases, outreach alone may have been sufficient to encourage more seniors to participate. We believe that the bulk of the impacts were due to the demonstration services provided. While outreach can inform more seniors about the availability of the program, it does little to change the relative costs and benefits of participating. However, knowing the degree to which outreach alone would have raised participation in these sites—and whether it would have raised participation at all—would be valuable to state and local officials looking for effective strategies for increasing elderly participation in the FSP.